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(632) 552-9907

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NEWS HEADLINES

US-funded women shelter inaugurated in Zamboanga City

(Source: Manila Bulletin News Online – 1/14/08)

ZAMBOANGA CITY – US Ambassador to the Philippines Kristie Kenney and Mayor Celso L. Lobregat led the blessing and inauguration at the Zamboanga City Port last Friday of a P2.7 million halfway house, Bahay Silungan sa Daungan, for victims of human trafficking.

Kenney was assisted in the cutting of the ribbon by Ma. Cecilia Flores-Oebanda, executive director of the Visayan Forum Foundation Inc., Mayor Lobregat and Abdussabor A. Suwadjaan, Southern Mindanao port district manager.

The construction of the building for the halfway house was funded by the US government through the United States International Assistance for Development (USAID).

"Trafficking of persons as all of you know is a global problem. It preys on our weakest citizens and people who do not know better. Let us never stop defending the people who are victims of human trafficking and who cannot defend themselves against human traffickers. I encourage the media to awake the people on what is human trafficking," Kenney said in her message.

"I also commend RTC 16 Judge Jesus Garbon for convicting two human traffickers in a landmark decision on Dec. 5, 2005. I laud the prosecutor and law enforcers for gathering evidence and in the arrest of human traffickers and putting them in jail. It was a job well done," Kenney added.

The Bahay Silungan was turned over to the Visayan Forum Foundation as its caretaker.

In her acceptance message, Oebanda expressed gratitude to the US government through Ambassador Kenney and Sawadjaan of the PPA for the realization of the project.

"This key is a symbol of a great war against human traffickers. With the team work of the Inter-Agency Council Against Trafficking, we will fight for the freedom of the victims. Zamboanga City is the backdoor and gateway hell of Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines-East Asian Growth Area in transshipment of human trafficking," Oebanda said.

She also said that there were 18,000 victims of human trafficking on record and 43 cases were filed in court.

Among the members of the Inter-Agency Council Against Human Trafficking are the Philippine National Police, Criminal Investigation and Detection Group, Philippine Coast guard, Maritime Police, National transcrime Office, Department of Social Welfare and Development, Bureau of Immigration, National Bureau of Investigation, Marina, Philippine Ports Authority, Local Government Unit, and many others.

Port District Manager Sawadjaan said that Bahay Silungan in this city is the fifth constructed in the country. The first was built in Manila North Harbor. The others are in Sorsogon, Batangas City and Davao City.

Under the VFF concept, victims of human trafficking stay at halfway houses for two or three days before they return home or are transferred to a safe house or a long term government shelter.

The group also assists the victims in filing criminal cases against the recruiters and traffickers and work closely with other legal assistance NGOs to do so.

The VFF will also deploy a team of social workers and field organizers to provide counseling, temporary shelter and repatriation services to women and children.(Vic P. Arevalo)